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Published in *Women's Studies in Communication* 39:1 (2016), pp. 86–106; doi: 10.1080/07491409.2015.1126776
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Published online February 25, 2016.

Camp Horror and the Gendered Politics of Screen Violence: Subverting the Monstrous-Feminine in *Teeth* (2007)

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Abstract

This essay argues that Mitchell Lichtenstein's film *Teeth* (2007) is an exemplary appropriation of the femme castratrice, a sadistic and castrating female figure that subverts the patriarchal mythologies undergirding the gendered logics of both screen violence and cultural misogyny. The film chronicles Dawn's post-sexual assault transformation from a passive defender of women's purity to an avenging heroine with castrating genitals. First, I illustrate how *Teeth* intervenes in the gendered politics of spectatorship by cultivating identification with a violent heroine who refuses to abide by the stable binary between masculine violence/feminized victimhood. This subversive iteration of rape-revenge cinema is assisted by the filmmaker's introduction of camp, a playful and self-conscious cinematic style that renders transparent the fantasies guiding the cinematic construction of violence and the male gaze. Second, I argue that this revision of the rape-revenge genre equips audiences with important symbolic resources for feminist critiques of cultural misogyny. *Teeth's* avenging heroine updates the sexual politics of second-wave feminism to resist recent political efforts to regulate women's bodies.

Keywords: camp, monstrous-feminine, rape-revenge cinema, vagina dentate, war on women

The vagina dentata is the primal myth that women's genitals are equipped with teeth capable of castration. The recurring myth prescribes that a male hero must conquer women and remove their vaginal teeth before he can safely commence with sexual intercourse

(Campbell, 1976). The legend bespeaks the dread of woman that pervades patriarchal cultures and the castration anxiety provoked by the "monstrosity" of woman's genitals. Whereas Freud (1953) traces castration anxiety to the father who punishes a child's oedipal desire, Creed (1993b) revisits the vagina dentata myth to revise this account of childhood psychological development and locate the male dread of sexual difference in the figure of woman as castrator rather than castrated. For Creed (1993b), the castrating vagina evinces the "monstrous-feminine" or "what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (p. 1). Feminist criticism of the vagina dentata myth reveals the deep cultural roots of misogyny and phallocentrism, linking them to the male impulse to subjugate the feminine.

In horror cinema, the recurrence of women-as-monster (witch, vampire, succubus, possessed body, primal mother, femme fatale) suggests that the dread of woman arises not from her lack but from her eviscerating power. Feminist film scholars argue that the vagina dentata unconsciously structures the gendered construction of monstrosity in the modern horror film (Creed 1993a, 1993b; Clover, 1988; Gohr, 2013; Heath, 1976; Towlson, 2014; Williams, 1984). Hence, horror is populated with female monsters (*Carrie* [Monash & DePalma, 1976], *The Exorcist* [Blatty & Friedkin, 1973], *Friday the 13th* [Cunningham, 1980]), feminized monsters (*Alien* [Hill, Giler, Carroll, & Scott, 1979], *Predator* [Davis & McTiernan, 1987], *The Silence of the Lambs* [Utt, Saxon, Bozman, & Demme, 1991]), and female-victims-turned-killers (*Halloween* [Carpenter & Hill, 1978], *Nightmare on Elm Street* [Burrow & Craven, 1984], *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [Hooper & Henkel, 1974]). While the construction of women in modern horror is organized around male dread of the female body, the peculiar subgenre of rape-revenge horror literalizes castration anxiety by featuring a heroine who avenges sexual trauma by neutering her male tormentors (*I Spit on Your Grave* [Zarchi, 1978], *Ms. 45* [Weisberg, Howorth, Kane, & Ferrara, 1981], *Naked Vengeance* [Santiago, 1985], *The Ladies Club* [Broderick & Greek, 1986], *The Last House on the Left* [Cunningham & Craven, 1972], *Thriller: A Cruel Picture* [Vibienius, 1973]).

An appropriation of the vagina dentata, the femme castratrice is a sadistic figure that makes "the male body, not the female body . . . bear the burden of castration" (Chaudhuri, 2006). Of all iterations of the monstrous-feminine, the femme castratrice most directly challenges the sadistic male gaze of classic cinema (Mulvey, 1975; Williams, 1984) by inviting spectators to disavow the perspective of the male victim and identify across genders with the avenging woman (Creed 1993b; Clover, 1988; Heller-Nicholas, 2011; Read, 2000). Beginning in the 1970s, this radical disruption of the male gaze reflects the subgenre's indebtedness to the sexual politics of second-wave feminism. Thus, the subgenre explicitly addressed nondiegetic political concerns such as rape, violence against women, and sexual/reproductive agency. Nonetheless, the most prominent theorizations of femme castratrice films are predominantly ahistorical, failing to account for their specific interventions into both cinematic and cultural politics. Creed (1993b), in particular, is more concerned with how femme castratrice films illustrate the inadequacies of Freud than how the monstrous-feminine engages changing political contexts. Although she provides valuable insights into the psychodynamics of patriarchy, her analysis of the monstrous-feminine privileges universal psychoanalytical insights over specific cultural politics. With the benefit of hindsight, there are sufficient grounds for feminist film critics to contrast the political interventions made by such films, as feminism has changed alongside the subgenre since the 1970s.

In this essay, I conceptualize the femme castratrice film not only as a textual product of feminist politics but also as a self-conscious and subversive response to the invocation of woman-as-monster in film and public culture. The recurrence of the femme castratrice in horror cinema suggests there is some plausible exigency familiar to audiences that summons her to action. Whereas critics have situated White male violence as a cinematic response to threats to hegemonic masculinity (Dyer, 1997; Kelly, 2014; King, 2011), feminist film theory could benefit from an account of the femme castratrice in cinematic and political contexts. The femme castratrice enacts sexual violence in a way that bespeaks what is "horrifying" about women; however, I argue that strategic appropriations of the monstrous-feminine direct audience attention to both the cinematic and cultural discourses that subject women to masculine violence. According to Shugart (1997), feminist writers have a long history of subverting patriarchal ideology by strategically redeploying masculinist narratives against the hegemonic grain. Guided by her contention that feminist appropriations of folklore reclaim "patriarchal fables in order to challenge patriarchal constructs," I argue that femme castratrice films redeploy the woman-as-monster to menace the phallocentric institutions attempting to control women's sexual agency (Shugart, 1997, p. 210).

This analysis is motivated by the recent resurgence of the genre. After a brief hiatus, rape-revenge narratives have recirculated throughout the past decade of cinema in films such as *Hard Candy* (Slade, 2005), *The Brave One* (Downey, Silver, & Jordan, 2007), *Descent* (Marshall, 2007), *Run! Bitch Run!* (Hayes & Guzman, 2009), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Fincher, Zaillian, & Larsson, 2011), and *Girls Against Boys* (Chick, 2012). The revival of the subgenre is no less buttressed by remakes of such iconic 1970s films as *The Last House on the Left* (Illiadas, Alleca, & Ellsworth, 2009), *I Spit on Your Grave* (Monroe, Rockoff, & Zarchi, 2010), and *Straw Dogs* (Lurie & Goodman, 2011). I contend that recent feminist appropriations of the femme castratrice illustrate the subversive potential of feminist horror films, particularly at a moment in public culture during which women's sexual and reproductive freedoms are constructed in monstrous terms. I examine the film *Teeth* (Lichtenstein & Pierpoline, 2007) as an exemplary appropriation of the femme castratrice that subverts the patriarchal mythologies girding contemporary political efforts to curtail women's sexual and reproductive freedoms. In *Teeth*, Dawn is a high school abstinence-until-marriage spokesperson who, after being raped by a fellow chastity advocate (Tobey), discovers that she possesses the mythic vagina dentata with the power to castrate male assailants. The film chronicles Dawn's transformation from a modest defender of women's purity to an avenging heroine with castrating genitals.

Using rape culture, the abstinence-until-marriage movement, and the subjugation of women by the scientific and medical establishment as themes, the film identifies the popular ideologies that breathe new life into the image of woman-as-monster. Director Mitchell Lichtenstein was inspired by the troubling "connection between hiding the female reproductive system and genitalia, and the persistence of the myth of the vagina dentata."¹ Although Lichtenstein announces his intent to subvert patriarchal folklore, an analysis of the cinematic and cultural work performed by *Teeth* has even greater implications for how feminist film theorists have conceptualized gendered violence in horror cinema and how such films mediate political antagonisms over the status of feminism. Thus, I advance two arguments that revise how feminist film scholars have theorized the kind of cinematic and

political resources developed in rape-revenge films. First, I show how *Teeth* intervenes in the gendered politics of spectatorship by cultivating identification with a violent heroine who refuses to abide by the stable binary between masculine violence/feminized victimhood. This subversive iteration of rape-revenge cinema is assisted by the filmmaker's introduction of camp, a playful and self-conscious cinematic style that renders transparent the fantasies that guide the cinematic construction of violence and the male gaze. Therefore, the genre can be used to interrogate both cinematic and cultural constructions of sex/gender binaries. Second, I show how femme castratrice films equip audiences with important symbolic resources for feminist critiques of cultural misogyny. To this end, *Teeth's* avenging heroine revives and updates the sexual politics of second-wave feminism to resist the contemporary "war on women."

The feminist politics of horror

Since its emergence in the 1970s, the rape-revenge film has undergone significant transformations in relationship to both political advances and challenges to contemporary feminism (Read, 2000). Projansky (2001) adds that the subgenre represents an ongoing hegemonic negotiation whereby popular culture attempts to make sense of feminism. The second wave's emphasis on women's sexual agency and the politicization of violence against women (Rosen, 2000) laid the cultural groundwork for depictions of women violently refusing victimhood. Avenging rape does not, on its own, advance female empowerment. Instead, a film's political investments are reflected by how violence is enacted and how spectators are invited to identify with the avenging hero/heroine. Take, for instance, the introduction of rape into the plots of vigilante films. In *Death Wish* (Winner, Garfield, & Mayes, 1974), Paul Kersey (Charles Bronson) becomes a vigilante after his wife is murdered and daughter raped during a home invasion. In the same year, *Straw Dogs* (Peckinpah & Goodman, 1974) depicts a beta-male mathematician who, following the rape of his wife, also reasserts his masculinity through a controlled but murderous campaign against the assailants. The filmmakers exploited the brutality of rape to advance law-and-order conservatism, characterized by fear of crime and demands for retributive justice (Canby, 1974; Elsaesser, 2004).

Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (Cunningham & Craven, 1972) differs from previous examples in that it genders the distinction between male and female revenge. John and Estelle Collingwood avenge their daughter's rape by luring the group responsible into their family home. While John uses phallic implements such as a shotgun and chainsaw, Estelle seduces one of the assailants with promises of oral sex in order to castrate him. John's performance reinforces the phallic masculinity of the previously mentioned films, yet Estelle's eroticized vengeance deprived the male aggressor of his instrument of sexual violence, drawing attention to the phallocentrism and gender subjugation that underlies rape. While the film lacks the self-conscious stylization of later rape-revenge cinema, it introduces castration as a particularly menacing form of female retribution. In *I Spit on Your Grave* (Zarchi, 1978), Jennifer, the survivor of a brutal gang rape, acts on her own behalf by systematically hunting and luring the assailants to their death. Jennifer traverses

masculine and feminine subject positions throughout the film. While she enacts phallic violence on some, she seduces and castrates others.

The femme castratrice film develops as a hybrid of vigilante films, sexploitation, and low-budget horror, blended with feminist consciousness. This subgenre provides a stark contrast to its early predecessors. Audiences are invited to identify with the female protagonist's experience of violation and demand for retribution, including by castration (Creed, 1993b). In earlier films, the female victim was ostensibly agentless, but later the avenging female protagonist reasserts power over her own body through sexual violence. The female avenger narrative interrupts the cinematic ritual of masculine "regeneration through violence" by redirecting retributive energies toward conspicuous signs of cultural misogyny (see Slotkin, 2000, p. 8). The male victim (object) is portrayed as the real monster of rape-revenge narratives, forced to occupy the unfamiliar but historic disposition of women in the slasher film (Clover, 1988). The erotic context of these films also draws attention to the distinct sexual threat of women's agency in a culture governed by phallogentric logics.

This transformation illustrates that the salience of rape-revenge narratives is dependent on sociopolitical context. The politics of the larger umbrella of horror are well documented, particularly the potential to serve as allegories for "Otherness": race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and nationality (Brummett, 2013; Phillips, 2005; Wood, 2003). While horror films are typically populated with fictional monsters, they often stand in the place of or directly index real fears (Gunn, 2008; Hahner, Varda, & Wilson, 2014). Phillips (2005) contends that the cultural salience of horror films is illustrated by how they "resonate" with audience's experiences and anxieties. Even when a film's content is fantastical, there remains something in the text that rings true—some repressed anxiety that manifests in on-screen monsters (p. 7). Wood (2003) makes the case that horror films are a culture's "collective nightmares" or private fears translated into public contexts (p. 70). At the same time, horror films also incorporate elements of surrounding cultural context as potential sources of fear (the family, science, medicine).

The political struggles that once animated the genre have evacuated the present film cycle. Constrained by postfeminist culture, many of these films align with more conservative investments in individualism, self-reliance, retributive justice, and victims' rights (Stringer, 2011). As these films illustrate, postfeminist culture translates the second wave's sexual politics and the third wave's focus on upending normative gender roles into an antipolitical, consumerist demand for individual lifestyle choices (Projansky, 2001). Unmoored from its commitments to sexual agency and gender justice, postfeminist culture accommodates nearly any choice a woman can make (including adherence to antifeminist politics) as a feminist principle (Rodino-Colochino, 2012).

This context explains how the remakes of classic rape-revenge films have also lost much of their countercultural edge. For instance, *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) and *The Last House on the Left* (2009) abandoned the eroticized revenge of their predecessors (Catsoulis, 2010; DeFore, 2010). In the originals, seduction followed by castration evoked the mythic subtext of the vagina dentata, drawing connections between fears of feminism and the sadistic male gaze. Their predecessors also more effectively conveyed the brutality of rape, visually lingering to the point of disgust and indicting the objectifying gaze of the spectator. Henry (2014) contends that "the remake tends to lack these qualities with its one-dimensional

characters, its bland po-faced cast, its disturbingly unaffected violence, its lack of sociopolitical critique . . . its emphasis on family values, and its neat adherence to Hollywood genre conventions" (pp. 32–33). Moreover, the original version of *The Last House on the Left* wreaked havoc on the 1950s suburban enclave, pitting the distorted Manson-like paternalism of Krug against John's family-values conservatism. Even the revenge exacted in the 2011 *Straw Dogs* exchanged the unfulfilled critique of masculinity for a focus on the inviolability of private property and the rule of law (Scott, 2011).

This is not to suggest that genre cannot be reanimated with the sexual politics that introduced cinemagoers to the femme castratrice. Fradley (2013) finds promise in the use of "expressionist" or "hyperbolic" sexual violence to catalyze political conversations about the all-too-real specter of rape (see also Craig & Fradley, 2010). I contend that *Teeth* stands out among the previously mentioned films in that it reaches into the past for inspiration by adapting and elaborating on second-wave feminist rhetoric and film theory as resources for resistance. For instance, the film reinvigorates feminist critiques of environmental destruction, technology, and scientific progress to connect malevolence toward nature and the subjugation of the feminine in contemporary rape culture. Second-wave feminism introduced a poignant critique of the patriarchal ideology undergirding new technologies, advances in medical experimentation, and general scientific progress (Unger, 2004). While its gender essentialisms caused the paradigm to wane, "ecofeminism" brought attention to the systematic exclusion of women from the hard sciences and the disparate effect that scientific and medical progress had on women (Gaard, 2010).

Concerns with the patriarchal sciences once animated feminist horror films such as *It's Alive* (Cohen, 1974), *The Stepford Wives* (Scherick & Forbes, 1975), *Demon Seed* (Jaffe & Cammell, 1977), and *The Brood* (Solnicki & Cronenberg, 1979) (Muir, 2002). *Teeth* reinvigorates ecofeminist analysis to illustrate how scientific and medical progress contribute to the subjugation and control of women's bodies. An oppressive scientific, medical, and educational establishment serves as an illustrative backdrop for Dawn's violent campaign against cultural misogyny. This trope resonates with the present-day "war on women" in which women are forced to endure invasive medical procedures to obtain legal abortions, criminally prosecuted for miscarriages, denied access to birth control and women's health services, and subjected to the pseudoscientific shame appeals of abstinence education (Brody, 2014). More generally, the film points to the disparate impact of ecological damage and toxic exposure on women, inviting audiences to see the interconnectivity of the rape of women and the symbolic rape of nature under capitalism (Gardner, 2013; Scott, 2015).

The film's critical edge resides in its blend of self-conscious political engagement with the postfeminist present alongside portraits of the mythical psychodynamics of patriarchy. And despite Creed (1993b) and Clover's (1988) passing acknowledgment that it was the feminist campaign to politicize rape that accounts for the origins of the femme castratrice subgenre, they attend almost exclusively to the gendered psychodynamics of spectatorship at the expense of an analysis of horror cinema's ideological labor. As Read (2000) argues, the sole focus on the status of woman as castrator in the works of Freud has left critics "unable to adequately account for historical change, for either the endurance or the mutability of the rape-revenge story" (p. 11). Camouflaged in their analysis, however, is a sense that audience identification is shaped by external referents embedded in the social context.

While they do not elaborate further on the broader politics of femme castratrice films, their inquiry discloses an invitation to the spectator to engage in the political critique of misogyny. This essay extends their insights to assess the kind of resources the femme castratrice potentially makes available for resistance to postfeminist culture.

The horror of feminist politics

Attending to the contemporary politics of femme castratrice films helps trace how feminist struggles for sexual autonomy become transcoded into cinema, and by implication wrestle with hegemonic notions of female agency. Thus, because femme castratrice films most directly transcode feminist responses to sexual violence, I suggest that *Teeth* calls for an interpretive strategy that maps over a cultural grid of intelligibility, or that which is happening in society that makes an avenging female monster empathetic and her victims symbolically aligned with contemporary misogyny (Kellner, 2010; Zavarzadeh, 1991, p. 11). My analysis illustrates how identification with the character Dawn symbolically enlists spectators in resistance to the sources of sexual violence on and off screen. Femme castratrice films can be understood not only by how they draw from social antagonisms over feminism but also by how they intervene into public culture by providing the imaginative grounds for subverting institutions and practices predicated on cultural misogyny.

It is significant that *Teeth* was released near the end of a political epoch during which decades of hard-won victories for women's reproductive rights were counteracted by restrictions on abortions and Medicaid assistance to low-income women as well as the reinstatement of the abortion "gag rule" in U.S. family planning assistance (Kliff, 2012). In addition, the George W. Bush administration spent more than \$1 billion on abstinence-only education programs replete with misinformation about sexuality and shame appeals directed at young girls (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States [SIECUS], 2013; Valenti, 2009). By 2012, the colloquialism, "war on women," had emerged as shorthand for what appeared to be a 30-year-long systematic effort by American conservatives to impose severe restrictions on women's reproductive freedoms and sexual autonomy. Recent examples include legislative efforts to defund Planned Parenthood, eliminate insurance coverage for birth control, require medically unnecessary ultrasounds for women seeking abortions, and codify fetal personhood (Valenti, 2014).

The "war on women" gives concrete political form to what is currently articulated as fearful about women in public culture. A few recent examples are illustrative on this point. First, a dread of women has resulted in a verbal and visual taboo surrounding women's bodies. In Gilmore's (2011) words, "masculine fears often find their locus in female genitalia, the defining anatomical fact of womanhood" (p. 39). In 2012, Michigan state representative Lisa Brown was silenced on the house floor for saying "vagina" during a speech opposing legislation that imposed new restrictions on abortion access (Brown, 2012). After being removed from the floor, fellow representative Mike Callton told the press that her language was too vile and shocking for "mixed company." In Lynchburg, Virginia, school board members withheld their approval of high school science textbooks on the condition that illustrations of vaginas be covered or removed (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2014). Throughout the United States, the word *vagina* has been redacted in everything

from newspaper advertisements for *The Vagina Monologues* to new editions of *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl* to the iTunes release of Naomi Wolf's (2012) book *Vagina* (Bennett-Smith, 2012; Flood, 2013). In all of these examples, *vagina* is treated as lurid euphemism rather than medically accurate nomenclature.

In other instances, political conservatives couch women's reproductive freedom in explicitly monstrous terms. Recently, Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) compared legal abortions to infanticide, suggesting that women who terminate their pregnancies are culpable of murder (Culp-Ressler, 2015). The monstrous-feminine also lurks within the conservative blogosphere, where fabricated tales of killer feminists who abort their sons demonstrate the evils of reproductive freedom (Tomchak and Wendling, 2015). Even the recent congressional effort to defund Planned Parenthood was premised on a falsified viral video produced by an antiabortion group that charged the organization with happily profiting from the harvest of aborted fetal tissue (Rovner, 2015). These examples demonstrate that women occupy the position of both victim and monster in "war on women" discourse. Ambivalent about whether women must be revered for their modesty or punished for their misandry, "war on women" discourses construct a composite image of woman as Other.

Thus, *Teeth* imports this political context into the text of the film by structuring a fictional universe not unlike our own in which the confluence of misogynistic cultural forces summons an avenging heroine. Belief in an ongoing "war on women" creates the optimal conditions for audience identification with a young female character who transforms from passive victim to active agent of resistance. The film creatively subverts the ambivalent tensions of "war on women" discourse and the monstrous-feminine by constructing a protagonist who is at once victim and monster, punished and punisher—a woman whose violent actions ironically point to roots of violence against women in society and on the screen. To this end *Teeth* self-consciously identifies both repressed and explicit fears of women's bodies.

The monstrous-feminine refigured

Despite its graphic depictions of rape and castration, *Teeth* received generally positive reviews for its unconventional messages of female empowerment (Haupt, 2008; Holden, 2008).² The film appropriates the vagina dentata myth by situating the abject female body as an evolutionarily positive adaptation to a phallocentric culture. Dawn's monstrosity is a mutation that ultimately destabilizes the culture of misogyny pervading her community. The film's real monsters are a series of men who wish to exploit women's bodies: abstinence advocates, quack doctors, and rapists. The filmmakers summon the woman-as-castrator to symbolize a resistant feminine subjectivity; a reimagined sense of what has marked women as Other comes to represent her power. The film accomplishes this goal by identifying the root of monstrosity in the conspicuous cultural signs of masculine conquest (sexual violence, environmental destruction, and patriarchal science).

While I pay attention to narrative, plot, and dialogue, I also maintain that *Teeth* provides stylistic cues as to its broader subversive political critique. The film's exaggerated and often-humorous reliance on mythic literalism prompts the audience to view the film as an artifi-

cial construction dramatizing nondiegetic cultural narratives. To this extent, the film's critical stance toward gender and violence is enhanced by the adoption of camp aesthetics. Camp is a playful, hyperbolic, and parodic style that deliberately draws attention to the constructedness of a text (Mathijs & Sexton, 2012; Shugart & Waggoner, 2008; Sontag, 1981).³ Camp horror is engendered by low production values, exaggerated depictions of the grotesque, preposterous death and dismemberments, detached humor, and conscious deployment of generic tropes. Camp's self-referential aesthetics privilege transgressive critiques over literal interpretations of a film's diegetic elements. In *Teeth*, the exposed and unapologetic artificiality of camp style draws attention to the cultural narratives addressed throughout. While the director states that his purpose is to directly address misogynist cultural mythology, it is the over-the-top stylistic exaggeration that helps the film enact this political critique. Camp aesthetics enable the film to distinguish between an endorsement of nondiegetic violence against men versus a subversive critique of phallocentrism enacted through hyperbolic and supernatural portrayals of castration.

The politics of the phallic scene

To begin, the film relies on tropes of environmental toxicity that illustrate the connection between the conquest of nature, the feminine, and the contemporary "war on women." Phallocentric imagery of industrial conquest constructs a mise-en-scène of pervasive misogyny wherein rape culture is allowed to thrive. The film borrows from the paradigm of "ecofeminism" to illustrate why toxicity is both a productive descriptor and metaphor for contemporary misogyny. The femme castratrice is recast as a figure that engages not in individualistic acts of retribution but instead in symbolic transgressions against a larger patriarchal system that is both mythical in origins and political in practice.

Two phallic nuclear cooling towers loom ominously over Dawn's hometown, spewing toxic vapor into the air and disturbing the landscape's natural beauty. The film begins with establishing shots of pristine blue sky and green shrubbery, followed by a slow pan to the cold exterior of a nuclear power plant. The towers linger in the background of a repressed memory in which Dawn and her soon-to-be stepbrother Brad are young children playing together in a small pool. Driven by childhood curiosity, the two play a scopophilic quid pro quo game of "I'll show you mine if you show me yours." Brad's early childhood malevolence is established as he angrily defies his father's commands to not splash or touch Dawn. As Brad takes the game too far, he recoils in pain at the sight of his partially severed finger. Presumably, Brad attempted to penetrate Dawn and she defended herself with her "teeth." It is at this profound moment of childhood sexual differentiation that Brad becomes dreadfully aware of women's castrating power. The following title credits show phallus-shaped microbes ravenously consuming egg-like cells until a larger, mutated spherical cell quickly consumes the phallic parasites. The opening computer-generated imagery visually narrates Dawn's evolutionary adaptation against male sadism and the imposing presence of industrialism.

This introduction could suggest that Dawn's barbed genitals are the result of a genetic mutation brought on by the presence of toxins. In this interpretation, her adaptation is equivalent to a monstrous superpower that accentuates the mythological dread of women's

sexual agency. If it were aligned with the vagina dentata myth, a male hero would be summoned to subdue Dawn's monstrousness to symbolize the ritualistic conquest of women's power. However, the film goes on to suggest that male sadism is a significantly more dangerous malady than Dawn's castrating genitals. The semiotics of phallocentrism dramatically overshadows the anxious dread that typically precludes audience identification with female monsters. Most importantly, the film constructs Dawn's monstrosity as a natural response to an atmosphere of male hostility toward women.

The cultural climate of misogyny is symbolized by the conquest of the surrounding natural environment. The film's *mise-en-scène* strategically draws on the audience's cultural association of nature with the feminine, depicting the environment as subjugated by phallic buildings with cold industrial exteriors. Dawn's neighborhood is idyllic, full of dense forest, lush trees, and beautifully manicured lawns. She rides her bike carefree from home to school, meandering through a neighborhood that appears to be in sync with the rhythms of the natural environment. But as nature suffers, so do the film's female characters. For instance, Dawn's mother suffers from a chronic ailment whose connection to pollution is inferred by routine images of towers expelling toxic smoke preceded by shots of her coughing and writhing in pain. The towers symbolize the pernicious influence of misogyny that spreads unseen, like radiation. The chronic pain enforced on women and the irresponsible actions of men are implied to be the result of the unnatural subjugation of the feminine.

By contrast, the feminine is symbolized by natural elements, sometimes with vaginal qualities. For instance, the local swimming hole is replete with vaginal imagery. A waterfall surrounded by lush scrubs conceals the opening to a cave with moist interior walls where youth go to experiment with sex. The cave's exterior, however, is adorned with jagged rocks and stalactites that not only make the place appear treacherous but symbolize the threat of castration to those who enter. While most men escape unharmed, the eventual castration of Tobey (Dawn's rapist) in the cave symbolizes the punishment administered by nature (the feminine) for those who violate her sanctity. It is the site where Dawn discovers her "teeth" and acknowledges her vulnerability to the brute force of patriarchy. The cave is also a vaginal setting that symbolizes Dawn's inner strength. By contrast, the cave also reveals Tobey's hidden malevolence. The simultaneous natural beauty and treachery of the cave suggests that castration, the evisceration of the masculine, is a consequence of violating the feminine.

The film adorns male-dominated institutions such as science, medicine, and education with austere facades whose ugliness contrasts with the landscape's natural beauty. For instance, the entrance to Dawn's school is a veritable gauntlet of male catcalls and sexual taunts. The protection of her chastity club offers little reprieve, as it not only becomes a source of alienation from her own body but her pathway to meeting Tobey, who disguises his misogyny with pious appeals to purity. In class, the school's sex educator reveals his fear of women through his inability to discuss or display images of women's reproductive organs. The school's textbooks have been sanitized of references to vaginas or any images that violate the principles of women's modesty.

Meanwhile, the doctor's office Dawn visits for a panicked gynecological exam is a cold, nondescript aluminum building with uninviting mechanized features. The dimly lit, windowless building imposes a dark gray hue on a barren examination room. The male doctor

who examines Dawn takes sadistic liberties with her genitals, removing his gloves and lubricating his fingers to penetrate her. Taken together, the cold exterior of both buildings and the omnipresent cooling towers constructs an uninviting atmosphere for women. The phallic scene establishes the atmospheric conditions that might render a woman's evolutionary adaptation not only intelligible but also necessary for survival. The film's *mise-en-scène* suggests that rape, abstinence, and domestic abuse are intimately connected to male conquest.

Tropes of environmental toxicity employed throughout the film have extraordinary resonance with contemporary feminist politics. The toxic backdrop in the film symbolizes the social poison of patriarchy that pollutes our world. The trope cultivates a sense of urgency, drawing strength from growing public awareness of the damaging consequences of human-induced environmental degradation (Littig, 2014). As engendered by the film's menacing phallic imagery, representations of toxicity communicate that misogyny is quite literally killing women. The film reframes the construction of women's monstrosity, and consequently Dawn's revenge, as a valid reaction to a phallocentric culture. The filmmaker's use of environmental toxicity also reintroduces audiences to an ecofeminist paradigm wherein environmental destruction and women's oppression are interconnected. Taken as a more literalist expression, a feminist analysis of the masculine conquest of nature adds a layer of complexity to how audiences are invited to understand the roots of the contemporary "war on women." As Littig (2014) argues, "The reason for women's oppression and for the destructive exploitation of nature may ultimately be found in the instrumental understanding of nature in modern science and in its basic dualistic pattern which opposes nature to culture" (p. 10). It is for this reason that many feminists organize against pesticides, nuclear power, climate change, and other industrial assaults on the natural environment (Nelkin, 1981; Gaard, 2010). The film similarly infers that men's efforts to sexually conquer Dawn are rooted in the Western paradigm of separating culture from nature.

When separated from its essentializing tendencies, I contend that appropriating particular aspects of an ecofeminist paradigm provides a powerful analytical tool for contemporary feminism. First, an ecofeminist perspective suggests that efforts to legislate control over women's sexual and reproductive autonomy find their historical roots in the elevation of masculine rationality (culture) over the feminine body (nature). This critique might explain why the medical sciences withhold birth control and force women to give birth to children who are the product of rape or to endure, among other things, humiliating medical procedures to obtain a legal abortion (Boonstra & Nash, 2014). The portrayal of Dawn's medical rape represents the routine but painful erosion of sexual and reproductive agency within the American health care system.

Second, an ecofeminist paradigm suggests that feminist issues are also environmental ones. For instance, breast cancer and poor reproductive health have been linked to long-term chemical exposure and other forms of industrial pollution (Brody & Rudel, 2003). Therefore, there are grounds for alliances and solidarity between feminists and environmental justice activists. The commonalities between environmental and feminist concerns might find similar root causes at which to direct their attention. The sustained attention to the mythical dread and subjugation of the feminine might unite and add clarity to each constituency's social analysis.

Feminine purity

In *Teeth*, the abstinence-until-marriage movement represents a unique political manifestation of the mythic dread of woman. Dawn begins the film as a devout Christian who speaks to high school students on behalf of her organization, The Promise, about the importance of remaining sexually pure. Indeed, many feminist critics have identified how the abstinence-until-marriage movement extends the contemporary "war on women" by reducing the value of young women to whether or not they have sex and enforcing a gendered double standard that constructs women's sexuality as sinful (Fahs, 2008; Kelly, 2014; Valenti, 2009). Hence, the abstinence movement is an axis point at which the mythical dread of the feminine meets political practice.

Guided by neoconservative nostalgia for the traditional nuclear family, the abstinence movement is part of a political backlash against women's liberation and sexual liberation (Irvine, 2004). Underlying this nostalgia is a profound disdain for female sexuality, manifest in the movement's demand that women must remain virgins for their future husbands (Carpenter, 2005; Manning, 2015). Therefore, abstinence advocates vacillate between infantilizing young women and blaming them for provoking young men's physical desires. For instance, Heritage Keepers' abstinence curriculum explains that "males are more sight orientated whereas females are more touch orientated. This is why girls need to be careful with what they wear, because males are looking! . . . For this reason, girls have a responsibility to wear modest clothing that doesn't invite lustful thoughts" (Badgley & Musselman, 1999, p. 46). Another example can be found in the advocacy of abstinence spokesperson Pam Stenzel, who is renowned for praising young women for their natural modesty and in the next breath making such statements as "If you take birth control, your mother probably hates you" (quoted in Culp-Ressler, 2013). In abstinence discourse, young women are both innocent icons of purity and wicked temptresses who invite physical and social danger. Abstinence discourse illustrates how misogynistic culture is often ambivalent about the status of women in society, casting them as weak victims, precious objects, and horrific monsters.

The fetishization of the untouched female body is the counterpart to the monstrous woman whose deviant desires threaten to pollute the male body and unravel the heterosexual nuclear family. As Kelly and Hoerl (2015) explain, "The overarching lesson of abstinence discourse is that adult women who seek sexual autonomy are revolting, while young girls who remain in a state of preadolescent innocence are desirable" (p. 143). As female sexuality precipitates danger, Bernau (2007) maintains that insistence on women's purity is a mechanism of control that "arrest[s] their development at an imagined presexual state of innocence" (p. 181). Ritual purity, then, is grounded in the monstrosity of the feminine, and the abstinence movement is part of a political effort to regain control lost to advances in women's sexual and reproductive rights.

Thus, Dawn's ardent defense of abstinence disguises her initial but unconscious complicity with women's subjugation. Proudly displaying her purity ring, Dawn adheres to the belief that women have a "natural modesty . . . built into [their] nature." She implores her fellow students to "keep your gift wrapped . . . until the day you trade it in for that other ring. That gold ring. Get it?" She draws pictures of a wedding dress while daydreaming in class and has erotic fantasies about marrying Tobey. She even wears irreverent abstinence

apparel emblazoned with such statements as "Warning: Sex Changes Everything." Here, abstinence discourse is representative of a deep-rooted cultural misogyny premised on disciplining the feminine. Therefore, her ultimately violent resistance symbolizes how active female sexuality disturbs the seamless working of patriarchy.

Throughout the film, the presence of abstinence culture serves three primary functions. First, the rhetoric of *The Promise* reveals that the valorization of women's purity is premised on a terrifying dread of women's bodies. Take, for instance, that the tilted bright red ring used as the logo for *The Promise*, when viewed head on, conspicuously resembles a vagina. This subversive visual imagery points to the abstinence movement's conflation of purity and femininity, illustrating that ritualistic virginity pledges and chastity clubs are primarily targeted at controlling young women's bodies. As Dawn pleads for young women to protect their "precious gift," the suggestive red lips linger in the background only slightly out of focus, hinting at a part of female anatomy that cannot be named. The juxtaposition of vaginal imagery with Dawn's exhortation on feminine purity highlights how the social construction of virginity is almost exclusively synonymous with femininity. The film suggests sexual abstinence is a project designed to contain the uncanny threat of women's bodies.

Second, the abstinence-until-marriage movement provides the filmmakers with the symbolic resources to represent how it is that the monstrous-feminine operates axiomatically in political appeals to preserve women's innocence. Pro-virginity discourse in particular emphasizes that a woman's virtue is almost solely determined by her decision to abstain from sex. For instance, Dawn argues that virginity "is the most precious gift of all," a commodity that one should not "give . . . to the first guy who buys you a big bunch of roses." In short, it can be exchanged only for a wedding ring. Dawn's abstinence stump speeches illustrate how virginity is quite often constructed as both a sign of women's moral worth as well as their exchange value in a patriarchal marriage economy.

Moreover, as a consequence of her participation in *The Promise*, Dawn fears that her premarital physical urges are monstrous. For instance, her sexual fantasies frequently become nightmares during which she imagines her own vagina as a monstrous overgrown scorpion with menacing castrating pinchers. She exclaims in disgust, "What is wrong with me?" then follows up by repeating a mantra of "purity, purity, purity." Abstinence discourse in *Teeth* points to how the moral worth of women is frequently reduced to their (abject) bodies. Moreover, Dawn's profound dread of her body reflects the kind of fear appeals found throughout abstinence-only curricula (Waxman et al., 2004). In addition to misleading information about the risks of premarital sex, abstinence curricula typically includes classroom exercises that ask students to pass a piece of gum or chocolate around the room to learn the lesson that no one wants to marry a person that has been "used" (SIECUS, 2013).

Finally, sexual abstinence is revealed to be the benevolent facade for contemporary rape culture. In Valenti's (2009) words, "So long as women are supposed to be 'pure,' and so long as our morality is defined by our sexuality, sexualized violence against us will continue to be both acceptable and expected" (p. 147). The notion that women are primarily responsible for stoking men's desires and that women who express sexual desire are

"used" helps rationalize sexual assault. Indeed, most of the film's upstanding male characters are either rapists or express malevolent attitudes toward women. However, it is significant that of all the men in her community it is Tobey—her love interest and fellow abstinence advocate—who rapes Dawn. Her initial romantic interest in Tobey was premised, in part, on his purported commitment to abstinence. He builds rapport with Dawn by confessing that he made the mistake of having sex once but that he is "still dealing with guilt." Charmed by his honesty, Dawn counsels Tobey about ways that he can strengthen his resolve, and the two develop romantic feelings for each other. Yet Tobey's expressed interest in abstinence is portrayed as a cynical ploy to enter into a physical relationship. While Tobey expresses a desire to remain "pure," his duplicity is unveiled when he sexually assaults her. As he restrains Dawn, Tobey exclaims in the tone of a petulant child: "I haven't jerked off since Easter." His violent expression of sexual frustration reveals that beneath his soft-spoken respect for Dawn lies a more insidious sense of male entitlement to sexual gratification. Tobey symbolizes many of the problems with male enthusiasm for feminine purity—specifically, the notion that women's virginal bodies are "gifts" or exchange commodities for their future husbands cultivates the expectation that women be sexually available to men, even without consent.

Dawn's initial reaction to her rape also reveals the toxic interaction between feminine purity and rape culture. Dawn expresses feelings of shame, accentuated by the discovery that her body is monstrous. Meek and confused, Dawn tells the audience at an abstinence rally that she cannot lead them anymore: "Yesterday I could have done that because yesterday I was pure." In unison, the audience extols biblical mythology, calling attention to the original sin of Eve. As Dawn fails to deliver another compelling address, the students respond like mindless automatons: "The serpent beguiled me and I ate." Dawn's guilt stems from the overinflated value fundamentalist Christian organizations assign to the preservation of pristine female bodies. In sum, the abstinence-until-marriage movement provides the filmmakers with the opportunity to connect existing political ideologies with deep-rooted cultural misogyny, and rape culture with the myth of feminine purity. These portrayals generate a compelling rationale for Dawn to assume the persona of an avenging heroine.

The new avenger

Teeth subverts the cultural mythology of the vagina dentata by reversing feminine and masculine subject positions. The film reframes female monstrosity as a source of physical power that enables women to combat a culture of gender violence. It is male monstrosity—sadism, phallocentrism, patriarchy—that summons a female heroine to reestablish moral order. Rather than sanctioning the literal castration of men, the film playfully inverts patriarchal folklore to call attention to the relationship between the social construction of monstrosity and the evolution of the dread of women. Read through camp, Dawn's defensive attacks on male assailants represent the symbolic destruction of patriarchy and her burgeoning awareness of how her power resembles a pathway to feminist consciousness.

Like other horror films, *Teeth* features graphic displays of violence against women. Although it is not unique for its portrait of male monstrosity, the film provides a meaningful connection between male sadism and fear of female sexuality. For instance, Dawn's stepbrother,

Brad, represents the malevolent dimensions of patriarchy; he is a sadist who subjugates women out of fear of castration. Indicated by his ambivalent physical attraction to Dawn, Brad's hatred of women appears to stem from the repressed childhood memory that opens the film, the incipient moment during which he acquires a phobia of vaginas. Unemployed and living with his parents, Brad spends his time consuming drugs, listening to death metal, and having sex with his girlfriend. His acute fear of castrating women is revealed in his exclusive insistence on anal sex. The walls of his room are plastered with pornography and iconography of death. An attack dog with penetrating fangs, appropriately named "Mother" in light of his transparent castration anxiety, protects his space from intruders. Brad antagonizes Dawn with violent threats, sexual overtures, and reckless disregard for their parents' welfare. The filmmaker's construction of Brad as a monster connects his malevolence with his fear of women. In this way, the film points to the dangerous implications of the monstrous-feminine as a cultural axiom that men frequently express their dread of women through violence.

While the film lays bare the cultural roots of male malevolence, it exaggerates the mythic qualities of female monstrosity to reimagine women's bodies as natural sources of strength. Dawn's vagina dentata is portrayed as a positive evolutionary development, naturally selected to advantage her in an environment that is inhospitable to women. This trope is foreshadowed early in the film when Dawn's biology teacher discusses the evolutionary survival of snakes in an atmosphere of large mammal predators. The teacher explains that "the diamondbacks that had a rattle had a big advantage over those who didn't" and this development "happened to be beneficial to its survival." As Dawn walks into class late, the teacher concludes: "It's about life: why you are the way you are. Dawn, this is about you. And you missed it." The film prompts the audience members to reconsider what *they* may have overlooked about Dawn's unique physiology. In other words, the vagina dentata is not monstrous but a natural defense mechanism that gives women the ability to survive rape culture. Reimagined as a biological response to male violence, the film resignifies the vagina dentata as a source of female strength.

The film also debunks patriarchal folklore by chronicling Dawn's journey of bodily self-discovery. Naming the main character "Dawn"—a metaphor for light returning to what was once dark—cleverly alludes to this theme of enlightenment. While Dawn is initially terrified, the discovery prompts her to abandon her adherence to female modesty and investigate both the physiology and mythology of women's bodies. In the process she becomes more comfortable with her sexuality. Her transformation begins as she removes all the purity decor from the walls of her bedroom. Next, she returns to the swimming hole where she castrated her rapist and discards her purity ring in the water. A close-up of the ring fades to an eye-line match shot of a circular censorship sticker obstructing an image of female sex organs in Dawn's biology textbook. Dawn removes the decal in an effort to better understand her physiology. The removal of the sun-shaped decal again points to the broader theme of Dawn's sexual enlightenment. While she gains a beneficial understanding of the female anatomy, she discovers that her affliction is more mythological than medical. Throughout a research montage, the camera captures screenshots of Dawn's Internet search results about "vagina dentata mythology" and "castration and the vagina." One source explains that the myth "relates to fears of weakness and impotence, destruction

suffered during union." For audiences unacquainted with the mythology, these scenes establish that *vagina dentata* lore is a projection of male inadequacy at the sight of woman-as-castrator. However, unlike the mythology, *Teeth* invites identification with a female monster and directs audiences to examine the cultural precepts that construct women as Other.

Finally, the film denaturalizes feminine passivity and indicts the cultural assumptions that support male sexual aggression. Dawn's strategic use of her mythical adaptation rewrites the fable to call on a heroic *woman* to conquer the monstrosity in *men*. While on-screen this takes the form of castration, Dawn's retribution more generally symbolizes a resistant feminine subjectivity. This point is emphasized in a series of three confrontations that conclude the film. In the first scene, Dawn tests whether it is possible to have sex without lethal consequences. Now fully versed in the mythology, Dawn seeks out a "hero" to, as she reads from her research, "do battle with the woman, the toothed creature to break her power." She enlists the assistance of Ryan, a classmate who, unbeknownst to Dawn, enters into a wager to sleep with her. Despite her trepidation, the two successfully engage in sexual intercourse without incident. After experiencing sexual pleasure for the first time, Dawn displays newfound pride in her body. Her personal transformation culminates at the sight of her body in full-length mirror, her gaze reflecting newfound contentment in her form. Despite the success of their sexual encounter, Ryan is not the hero of the mythic legend. Like the film's other male characters, Ryan is a monster who capitalizes on her vulnerability. During a second sexual encounter, Ryan proudly confesses to his wager only to have his smug confidence dashed by the audible crunch of cutting teeth. As he hemorrhages blood, grasping at his graphic wound, Dawn glibly remarks, "Some hero." This confrontation reveals that Dawn's teeth menace only those men who subjugate women and establishes how the *vagina dentata* myth is fundamental to the control of women's bodies.

In a second confrontation, Dawn seeks revenge against Brad. The scene begins with Dawn facing her house, the menacing nuclear cooling towers in the distance. She ritually applies makeup to her face, like a warrior preparing for battle. In this scenario Brad is the real monster of the film that Dawn must slay. Tribal music (heavy percussion) plays in the background. As she enters Brad's room, Dawn stands next to an image of the fanged mouth of a snake that reads "deadly." The mythic creature Medusa, a figure with a head of writhing snakes, fills Brad's television screen. Dawn returns the look of Medusa with a smile on her face, seeing something of herself in the gorgon as it turns the male character on screen to stone. She climbs on top of Brad and insists they have sex. He looks at her face, her teeth exposed as the camera quickly cuts to Brad as a child holding his severed finger, and then to Dawn's awkward smile. She castrates Brad, stands up, and drops his penis onto the ground. Brad's evisceration is completed when Mother, the dog, glances respectfully at Dawn and consumes his severed penis.

In the final confrontation, Dawn rides her bike out of her hometown. After getting a flat tire, she decides to hitchhike and falls asleep in a stranger's car. She awakens to the driver shutting off the engine, preparing to assault her. With Dawn trapped inside the car, the old man takes great pleasure in making sexually suggestive facial gestures. Dawn looks at the camera with a sadistic smile, a wink to the audience that this unsuspecting assailant is

about to receive his just deserts. She looks down, turns her head, and returns his gaze. Indeed, this final gaze is crucial to the film's resolution. As Williams (1984) contends, in horror films "the female protagonist often fails to look, to return the gaze of the male who desires her" (p. 61). Instead, "the woman's gaze is punished, in other words, by narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy" (p. 61). Creed (1993b) also suggests that the subversive power of the femme castratrice is that *she* "controls the sadistic gaze: the male victim is her object" (p. 153). In one sense, *Teeth* simply inverts this logic by having Dawn return the male gaze; however, this analysis suggests that the film's embrace of camp invites a more critical examination of the gaze as a cinematic concept. By breaking the fourth wall, Dawn's look not only highlights the film's artificiality as a text but also disrupts the domestication of the gaze through fantasy (typically fulfilled through violence against the womanly object). With the audience caught looking, Dawn's look invites them to confront the transparent fantasies constructed for their pleasure, or what Mulvey identified as the stable, masterful subjectivity of Hollywood cinema.

Conclusion

Despite the latent antisex ideologies that accompany legislative efforts to restrict women's reproductive freedom, there is no corresponding panic over the state of men's genitalia—no sustained political effort to restrict access to impotency prescriptions and vasectomies. The temporal specificity of the current "war on women" reflects a unique convergence of the politically reactionary forces that have coalesced against contemporary feminism and mythic fears of the feminine. *Teeth* speaks directly to specific political manifestations of mythically rooted fears. The film redirects the woman-as-monster trope to denude the dread of woman that underlies contemporary movements against women's sexual freedom. The film advances an implicit critique of the ongoing "war on women," refracting the social struggles against the abstinence movement, rape culture, and anti-choice legislation. *Teeth's* conspicuous status as a feminist text offers a fitting example of how femme castratrice films intervene into sexual politics.

I suggest that this essay has implications for how feminist film studies might approach the politics of gendered violence in horror cinema and beyond. First, *Teeth* is consciously ambivalent about the relationship between gender, the male gaze, and cinematic violence. In other words, the film must depict sexual violence against women in ways that authorize the object/victim to turn the tables on the sadistic male subject. Scholars such as Clover and Creed acknowledge that femme castratrice films simultaneously reify and destabilize gender violence; therefore, they are less sanguine about the subversive cinematic and political potential of the female avenger. King (2010) notes that gendered cinematic violence is generally portrayed with ambivalence, as in the case of *The Brave One* (Downey, Silver, & Jordan, 2007), which asks the audience to "imagine themselves as the source of violence *and* its target" (p. 120). Indeed, such ambivalence has limitations and productive capacities. In the case of female vigilantism in *The Brave One*, the film's indictment of masculine violence ("the source of violence") is largely negated by film's feminization of male perpetrators, or the displacement of "the womanly object" ("its target") (King and Gunn, 2013, p. 200). In this way, cinema occludes the radical possibilities for cross-gender identification with the

female vigilante by merely giving masculine violence a "gender (and genre) reassignment" (King, 2010, p. 122).

In contrast to the recent rape-revenge cycle, *Teeth* introduces but challenges the ambivalence that accompanies gendered cinematic violence. Although Dawn provisionally transforms her male victims into "womanly objects" by making them "bear the burden of castration," she does so by over-identifying with the otherness that defines the womanly object. In that shared moment of violent interpenetration, woman is at once the subject and object of violence. Here, the film's ambivalence destabilizes the gendered binaries between masculine violence/feminine victimhood. The film does not achieve this effect by merely redirecting the gaze, a tactic that domesticates cinematic looking relations into a violent resolution wherein the male body is the displaced womanly object. King and Gunn's (2013) challenge to Mulvey's theory of the male gaze introduces the idea that scopic pleasure is derived not from fantasies of mastery but from the lack of stable subjectivity. Therefore, they argue, "Film harbors a radical potential because the gaze functions to unsettle 'mastery' and make it difficult for the spectator to achieve an aloof, critical distance" (p. 204). Working from this insight, it is possible that *Teeth* does not domesticate the gaze through violence but instead asks the spectator to confront the fantasies of stable, masterful subjectivity that undergird misogyny. Dawn dwells in this indeterminate gendered subjectivity at a moment in which she is both penetrated and castrating. Dawn's violence does not merely render the male body feminine, a strategy that by itself does not fundamentally interrogate hegemonic masculinity (King, 2009). While at first glance she deflects the gaze at the male body, she also refuses to perform a stable subjectivity. Meanwhile, the bodies of her victims are in no way ennobled through the logics of male sacrifice (i.e., the suffering of "men-as-womanly-objects") (King and Gunn, 2013, p. 206).

Finally, the film's use of camp is particularly important in drawing audience attention to the gendered logics of screen violence. By introducing camp into the solemn genre of rape-revenge horror, the film asks the audience to look critically at the very fantasy structures that have guided the cinematic construction of gendered violence. The film's playful self-awareness as a cinematic text disrupts normative constructions of gendered violence by inviting audiences to consider what appears stable as potentially artificial and indeterminate. Thus, *Teeth* is an example of how "film can provide an encounter with the gaze that does not return the fantasy" (King and Gunn, 2013, p. 204). Moreover, the film makes it difficult for the audience to comfortably maintain its fidelity to the male gaze—a way of seeing that relies on the construction of the womanly object of screen violence. In this way, the film challenges the postfeminist, individualistic frame that characterizes contemporary rape-revenge films. This analysis suggests that rape-revenge cinema presents filmmakers with radical opportunities to re-envision the gender politics of spectatorship, locating new ways to challenge the subjugation of women on and off screen.

Notes

1. Lichtenstein (2008), "Director's commentary."
2. Despite the critical acclaim, the film was not widely screened or distributed (grossing \$347,578) (Internet Movie Database, 2015). Jess Weixler won the Sundance special jury prize for dramatic acting (*Salt Lake Tribune*, 2007).
3. Camp stylistics have been historically linked to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) sensibilities. According to Sontag (1981), camp is not simply about self-reflexive silliness or attention to artifice but a style to make comments about gender, sex, and sexuality as discursive constructs.

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